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Challenging Norms: Halberstam's Ideas on Queer Failure and Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the concept of "queer failure" as articulated by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Challenging normative metrics of success, Halberstam reconfigures failure as a productive and radical alternative to heteronormative, neoliberal, and disciplinary modes of knowledge production. The paper critically examines key themes such as low theory, stupidity, forgetfulness, childhood, ant familial kinship, shadow feminism, and queer negativity, and situates them within broader debates in queer theory, feminist critique, and anticapitalist thought. Through an interdisciplinary approach, it argues that failure, when embraced, opens up new epistemologies and ontologies for queer life, resistance, and creativity.*

I. INTRODUCTION: TOWARD A THEORY OF FAILING BETTER

Worstward Ho, Samuel Beckett offers the iconic refrain: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."² Though often deployed to motivate perseverance, this dictum, when reread through queer theory, raises more radical possibilities. What if, rather than simply a stage on the road to success, failure itself offered new forms of life? What if queerness was not merely a deviation but a radical failure of the systems it resists?

Jack Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, takes up these provocations to reframe failure not as deficiency but as defiance—a counter-epistemology grounded in queer, feminist, and anticolonial modes of life and thought.³ This paper synthesizes and elaborates on Halberstam's framework, exploring how failure—as method, pedagogy, identity, and politics—enables alternative ways of being in a world structured by success-driven norms.

II. LOW THEORY AND THE SUBVERSIVE POTENTIAL OF UNKNOWING

Halberstam theorizes that "low theory" is a way of thinking that is anti-institutional, adaptable, playful, and dedicated to challenging prevailing epistemologies. It builds on the work of Stuart Hall and other cultural theorists. Low theory welcomes ignorance, lack, and

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² Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (Grove Press 1983).

³ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke Univ. Press 2011).

stupidity as instruments of disruption rather than pursuing mastery or disciplinary rigor.

According to low theory, queer failure is neither a tragic accident nor a moral failing. It is a conscious rejection of the standards that govern success in heteropatriarchal, capitalist societies.⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich criticizes neoliberal cultures' ideological use of "positive thinking," which internalizes failure as personal fault.⁵ Halberstam places queer lives as examples of this failure-as-resistance, especially those that defy gender or familial norms.⁶ The assertion made by Monique Wittig that "lesbians are not women" highlights how queerness can undermine heteronormative categories.⁷

III. QUEER PEDAGOGY AND ANTIDISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE

Alternative pedagogies that reject expert authority and hierarchy are supported by low theory. Halberstam models education as co-learning rather than instruction by drawing on Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.⁸ These frameworks oppose the neoliberal emphasis on productivity and the publish-or-perish model of academia. Foucault exposes how knowledge serves as a tool for control in his critique of disciplinarity.⁹ James Scott's idea of "legibility," meanwhile, cautions against attempts by the government to normalize conduct and stifle ambiguity.¹⁰

IV. PIXARVOLT AND THE QUEER POTENTIAL OF ANIMATION

Halberstam's animated children's movies, dubbed the "Pixarvolt," offer unexpected examples of queer resistance.¹¹ These movies, which range from *Finding Nemo* to *Chicken Run*, show ant familial ties, gender nonconformity, and collectively. Their anthropomorphic characters blur gender and species boundaries through trans biological behaviours.

Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* and *The Companion Species Manifesto* provide insight into how human norms are reflected in animal narratives.¹² Additionally, Sarah Franklin's biotechnology research creates new avenues for identity imagination. The relationship between a monster and a child in *Monsters, Inc.* defies conventional kinship. In *Robots*, building takes the place of reproduction. Power and affiliation are reimagined even in

⁴ Id. at 3

⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (Metropolitan Books 2009).

⁶ Halberstam, *supra* note 2, at 3.

⁷ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Beacon Press 1992).

⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum 1970); Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford Univ. Press 1991).

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Vintage Books 1995).

¹⁰ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (Yale Univ. Press 1999).

¹¹ Halberstam, *supra* note 2, at 29.

¹² Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Prickly Paradigm Press 2003).

the "silly" archive of children's movies.

V. FORGETFULNESS, STUPIDITY, AND QUEER TEMPORALITY

Halberstam subversively reinterprets forgetfulness and stupidity as instruments of subversion rather than as deficiencies. Dory's memory loss in *Finding Nemo* throws linear time off balance and provides an alternative to generational inheritance.¹³

Halberstam contends that male stupidity is celebrated while female stupidity is usually punished, exposing gendered hierarchies of knowledge. Stupidity works differently for people of different races and genders, as demonstrated by Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* and the stoner comedy *Dude, Where's My Car?*¹⁴

Refusing to remember is a queer act since it rejects inheritance, linearity, and heterofuturity.¹⁵ Lee Edelman's criticism of "reproductive futurism" is consistent with this.¹⁶

VI. ANTIFAMILIAL KINSHIP AND SHADOW FEMINISM

The very familial structures that mainstream gay rights movements aim to break into are frequently replicated. Like academics Kath Weston and Gayle Rubin, Halberstam criticizes the promotion of the nuclear family as the ideal social structure.¹⁷

Shadow feminism, as Halberstam frames it, is a feminism of refusal—a feminism of not doing, not becoming, not inheriting.¹⁸ It examines negativity, silence, and abnegation in contrast to the Oedipal metaphors that organize feminist genealogies. This alternative model is informed by Spivak's "subaltern" figure and Saba Mahmood's critique of agency.¹⁹

VII. CUTTING, COLLAGE, AND QUEER PASSIVITY

Collage and performance art turn into forms of unbecoming. Elfriede Jelinek, Kara Walker, and Hannah Höch's artwork demonstrates how non-normative aesthetics can fend off racialized and gendered violence.²⁰ Cutting is a kind of remaking rather than simple destruction.

Halberstam investigates the radical possibilities of using masochism as a feminist tactic. The

¹³ Halberstam, *supra* note 2, at 45.

¹⁴ Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (Penguin 2005).

¹⁵ Halberstam, *supra* note 2, at 70.

¹⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke Univ. Press 2004).

¹⁷ Kath Weston, *Families We Choose* (Columbia Univ. Press 1991); Gayle Rubin, *Thinking Sex*, in *Pleasure and Danger* (Carol Vance ed., Routledge 1984).

¹⁸ Halberstam, *supra* note 2, at 124.

¹⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton Univ. Press 2011); Gayatri Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Columbia Univ. Press 1988).

²⁰ Hannah Höch, *Cut With the Dada Kitchen Knife* (1919); Kara Walker, *Silhouettes series* (various years).

"lesbian phallus" exposes new gender and power structures.²¹ In art and photography, queer femininity embodies a refusal to "become woman" in the liberal, success-oriented sense.

VIII. HOMOSEXUALITY, FASCISM, AND QUEER NEGATIVITY

Halberstam also discusses a less pleasant past: some gay men's cooperation with fascist governments.²² Jensen's *The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness* and other works show that queerness is not inherently radical politically.²³

This critical edge also applies to Jasbir Puar's homonationalism theory, which uses gay inclusion as an excuse for imperialism and Islamophobia.²⁴ The work of Heather Love serves as a reminder that trauma, loss, and shame must not be erased by queer history.²⁵ According to Foucault, queer theory runs the risk of turning into yet another system of truth.²⁶

IX. CONCLUSION: LIVING FAILURE

Coraline and Fantastic's stop-motion animation style The queer temporality Halberstam outlines—discontinuous, imperfect, and resistant—is encapsulated by Mr. Fox.²⁷

Failure is not just an endpoint; it is a way of life. Halberstam ultimately encourages us to live in the messiness of queer theory rather than strive to master it. Forgetting, unbecoming, and failing open up new ways of thinking, teaching, and living. For queers, failure is not only inevitable—it is also beautiful.

²¹ Halberstam, *supra* note 2, at 140.

²² *Id.* at 153

²³ Erik Jensen, *The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness* (Haworth Press 2002).

²⁴ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke Univ. Press 2007).

²⁵ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard Univ. Press 2007).

²⁶ Foucault, *supra* note 9.

²⁷ Halberstam, *supra* note 2, at 164.

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